



# Beowulf and the Bane of the Thirteenth Retainer

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## BEOWULF & THE BANE OF THE THIRTEENTH RETAINER

### Abstract

There is a thirteenth retainer in the band of thanes who eventually fail Beowulf in his last fight, and his enigmatic presence has often been noted as part of a possible allegorical reading of the episode as strongly allusive to Gethsemane and the betrayal of Christ. Yet it seems to me that this discreet and, as it were, interstitial character is functionally perhaps more rewarding to study than it may seem at first. His theft of a cup, which he unfortunately reinvests into the symbolic system of indebtedness, ultimately compels a particular reading of Beowulf's *hamartia*, and hence of his ultimate tragedy. The fault, or the tragic flaw, may therefore be pointed out to reside not so much exclusively in the character of the hero as an individual man, but rather in a more communal and societal dimension. I would like to approach the poem from that particular angle, which does not at all imply a cultural study of the context, but simply a particular analysis of the text itself. For my suggestion happens to be corroborated, I think, by a cursive survey of those elements of the poem which have sometimes been called digressive, and which are really those textual hinges, when the scop swerves off from a diegetic telling of his story (as for instance to mention the thirteenth retainer). Thematic and structural links may be brought to light by a diachronic reading, which make for what I consider like a performative depth and momentum of the poem.

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When reading *Beowulf* today, one cannot ignore J. R. R. Tolkien's remark that, under the pen of too many critics in the past, "Poesis was usually forgotten; occasionally admitted by a side-door; sometimes dismissed upon the door-step" (53). To harp upon the same idea without offering to define poetry in a few words, yet another sentence from Tolkien's paper will be very helpful: "We must dismiss, of course, from mind the notion that *Beowulf* is a 'narrative poem', that it tells a tale or intends to tell a tale sequentially' (81). I would even risk going one step further, by saying that it seems very likely the *Beowulf* poet did not intend to tell a story in the first place. For the story the

poem does tell existed before it was composed, and so did most of the legends and histories it borrows from. On the contrary, the story-telling is perhaps merely a vehicle for a more complex and hidden mode of textual operation. In most works of fiction, descriptions are generated by narration, which they serve. But in some modern poetry, it is the other way around. There are narrative dimensions to most poems. But narrativity, considered as the syntagmatic drive of story-telling, is often ancillary to description reconsidered as what the Greek called *poiesis* or *mythopoiesis*, the making of a poem or of a myth. In *Beowulf*, there happens some comparable phenomenon, as it soon becomes fairly clear that narrativity, or linear diegetic progression, comes second to what Tolkien called composition, that is to say the vertical, paradigmatic dimension of the text. John Leyerle made a very perceptive remark when he said that "There are no digressions in *Beowulf*" (169). That amounted to a reshuffling of the habitual way of reading the poem, putting the emphasis no longer on its narrative story-line but on the pattern of its composition. And indeed, from a purely diegetic point of view, some so-called digressions do compare in bulk with the so-called main story. Leyerle had a tendency to view this very much from a formal point of view, but it could be shown to have thematic relevance too.

If one simply tries to make a script of *Beowulf*, much in the same way as the marginal annotations of some Bibles give an outline of the argument, some things appear with schematic clarity. Such an analysis gives some 18 sections, or groups of passages, of the text related to events or characters located outside the scope of the main story of Beowulf's life. Here is a very brief survey. (1) The prologue set Scyld Scefing and the model of Heroic kingship based on "treasure-giving". (2) The Scop's song of creation traces the origin of the murderous monsters, Grendel and his mother, to Cain, whose story of wealth and violence he tells in terms of vengeance and reward. (3) Beowulf's father Ecgþeow once killed the Wylfing Heotolaf and went in exile to King Hroðgar of the Geats who paid wergild for him. (4) The flyting or *beadurune* with Unferð brings about the story of Beowulf's brotherly contest with Breca, and Unferð's alleged murder of his brother. (5) In his sermon, Hroðgar mentions together the story of Sigemund and the dragon and that of Heremod the hoarder, thus linking bad kingship with *draconitas*. (6) Wealhþeow's speech against the adoption of Beowulf triggers off a proleptic allusion to Hroðulf's treason & usurpation of his cousin Hreðric's succession

to Hroðgar's throne. (7) The Fight at Finnsburg is yet another story of treason, treasure and matrimony. (8) The episode of the Brosings' Necklace, which passes on from Wealhþeow to Beowulf to Hygd, reinforces a thematic link between treasure won and lost by violence, but also human beings (men and women) together. (9) The story of Cain is reiterated in connection with Beowulf's fight against Grendel. (10) Heremod is mentioned again in connection with the sword hilt with the Flood in runes. (11) The *Fürstenspiegel*, or Mirror of a Prince, is continued, with special reference to Heremod as opposed to Beowulf. (12) Mirror of a Princess: Hygd is compared to Modðrþ and violence is seen to be a feminine vice too. (13) The story of Freawaru and the Heaðobards mirrors that of Hildeburgh and the Jutes. (14) Beowulf's inglorious youth is mentioned, just before the dragon first appears in the text, and among a description of his kingly giving of treasure, lands and women in reward to warriors. (15) The speech of the Last Keeper accounts for treasure and dragon. (16) Analepsis of Beowulf's accession to the throne, after Hygelac's defeat against the Frisians where he lost the Brosings' Necklace and Beowulf swam back with 30 armours, and before he avenges Eadgils by killing the Scylfing Onela, which is the only instance of Beowulf killing a man in single combat. (17) Beowulf tells the story of Heaðcyn's accidental killing of his brother Herebeald. (18) Ravenswood: Wiglaf tells of the war against the Scyldings, how Ongentheow rescued his wife but did not recover his gold, and how Hygelac had rewarded Eofor for his killing.

Irving has said that "Ravenswood is Beowulf's absence. It is what the world is like without him & without the almost superhuman values he asserts" (187). It is true, perhaps, but only metaphorically, for Ravenswood belongs to a historical time when Hygelac was still alive, and Beowulf not yet King. That it should be told after Beowulf's death is a way the poet has of saying that the world after Beowulf is very much like the world before and with Beowulf. And it foregrounds something else than the life of one man, something which transcends the individual destiny of a hero, although the story of such a fictional, mythical hero may very well be an exemplary manifestation of this other dimension. Those 18 "non-digressions" work as an iterative foregrounding of a particular thematic linking, connecting images and facts to create on strong complex isotopy, which I would like to call an isotopy of the symbolic order. What is insistently materialized is the "compact", the symbolic link there is between human beings and its

disruption. Wergild is a tangible metaphor of that, for it is the money one pays for the life of a man. But treasure is also given in reward for slaying an enemy, and so are women. The extra-diegetic elements of *Beowulf* are all about allegiance, marriages or adoption, and their failure, whether intentional or accidental. "Defeat is the theme", said Tolkien (110), yet *Beowulf* is a poetic pondering of its causes.

The first subject of this paper is a detail of the text which has not directly been mentioned among the extradiegetic elements, although it is part of numbers (14) & (15), concerning the apparition of the dragon and its treasure. It is really a border case. In Chapter XXXIV of the poem, when Beowulf "went to look on the dragon", he is said to be "one of twelve". The episode has sometimes been read as a strong allusion to the story of Christ on the Mount of Olives, all the more so because of sentences like "His mind was mournful, restless and ripe for death", which recall the despondency of Christ on the night before his arrestation, but also because of the presence of a Judas Iscariot figure: "he was the thirteenth of that company, the man who had brought on the beginning of the war, the sad-hearted slave—wretched, he must direct them to the place" (42). What may seem rather curious is that, although the allusion to Getsemane is rather clear, as we have a hero figure in the style of Cynewulf's *Criste*, with the 12 apostles portrayed as a band of thanes, ready for yet another Harrowing of Hell, still the role of Judas is inverted, as the thirteenth retainer here does not lead his enemies to Christ, but the possibly Christ-like hero and his company to the dragon. There is no space here to develop the possible theological implications of that inversion, and it will perhaps be enough to say that C. G. Jung has noticed a recurrent similarity of imagery between Christ and the dragon figure of the Antechrist,<sup>1</sup> which strongly resemble a cosmic application of his concept of *enantiodromy*, or conversion into the opposite. But this would take us too far, and if we pragmatically remain closer to the text, we may rest content to remark that this fleeting ambiguity has a number of echoes in the poem, which André Crépin has rather convincingly pinpointed, to conclude that "the antagonists share some essential characteristics. The reader, or the listener, ends up

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<sup>1</sup>. Le Christ, héros et homme-dieu, désigne psychologiquement le *soi*, autrement dit : il représente la projection de cet archétype très important et très central. Il a l'importance fonctionnelle d'un seigneur du monde intérieur, c'est-à-dire de l'inconscient collectif. Le soi, symbole de totalité, est une *coincidentia oppositorum*, il renferme donc en même temps lumière et obscurité. Dans le personnage du Christ, les contrastes réunis dans l'archétype sont distribués en partie dans le lumineux fils de Dieu, et en partie dans le diable. L'unité première des contrastes se reconnaît encore dans l'unité première de Satan et de Jahvé. Le Christ et le dragon de l'Antéchrist se touchent de très près dans l'histoire de leurs apparitions et dans leur signification cosmique (*Métamorphose de l'âme et ses symboles* 610).

wondering whether Grendel, his monstrous mother and the dragon are not weird doubles of Beowulf".<sup>2</sup> This is never asserted with any direct clarity in the text. But it is one example of how *Beowulf* works as a poem, tracing what Andrew Motion would call "vertical lines of desire", allusively and iteratively concatenating groups of images and assertions, to set its audience's imagination working, subliminally.

The thirteenth retainer also links this episode to Getsemane in yet another way, for he is said to have been "the finder" from whose hand the "glorious cup" had come into the possession of Beowulf. "O my father," says Christ praying in the Garden of the Mount of Olives, "If it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt" (Matt. 26: 39). Now, this cup is heavily laden with meaning. For it cannot fail to evoke the Holy Grail, and this is meaningful, not so much because to us, modern readers, it is reminiscent of later romances, but, within the economy of the poem, the cup is also the symbolic mead-bowl, the drinking cup of horn which is passed from hand to hand and from mouth to mouth among warriors assembled in the mead-hall, but also as it is remembered to have been at the Last Supper. The cup is the signifier of treasure *par excellence* — it is the treasure of treasure, the symbol of the symbol. The ceremonial passing of the mead-cup is a ritualized enactment of the exchange of gold, land or women, which makes the symbolic cement of Heroic society, both politically and religiously. And at this point of the poem, this cup has been mentioned repeatedly for the last 200 lines or so, which are a protracted narration of its theft. It is the whole explanation of the awakening of the dragon, and therefore of the death of Beowulf. The thirteenth retainer is said to have been "a man guilty of wrongdoing, who has stolen the gold cup from the dragon and offered it to Beowulf as wergild: "He bore to his master a plated cup, asked his lord for a compact of peace." This places him in the same situation as Ecgbeow, Beowulf's father, who was guilty of a murder which had to be paid for by so much gold. The audience is briefly reminded of this on the occasion of the "Getsemane episode": "Beowulf spoke, the son of Ecgbeow", just after the death of the hero is evoked metaphorically in terms of a plunder of "his soul's hoard". For treasure, in *Beowulf*, is the symbolic equivalent of human life.

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<sup>2</sup>. "Les antagonists partagent des traits essentiels. Le lecteur, ou l'auditeur, en arrive à se demander si Grendel, sa mère monstrueuse et le dragon ne sont pas des doubles inquiétants de Beowulf" (Crépin, Ellrodt, ed., p. 57).

Yet, what is wrong with the theft of the cup is that it is, so to speak, "dirty money". It has been stolen from a hoard, and not conquered by warlike deeds at the peril of one's life, or won as reward for an act of valour in combat. The text says of Beowulf that "HE had learned then from what the feud arose, the fierce malice to men". Although perhaps he came to know what he had done only after the event, by accepting this gold Beowulf has endorsed the guilt of the giver. This is how symbolic debts may be passed on from one man to another, or from one generation to the next. Beowulf the wise knows it well, who, in his anticipated story of Freawaru and the Heaðo-Bards, foresees that her arranged marriage will not prevent young warriors from drawing blood, when they see the gold spoils of their forefathers worn by the thanes of the bride's retinue, although they hold them in heirloom from their own fathers. But, what is more, within Heroic civilization and its system of values, one can easily infer how plundering the hoard of ancient men amounts to placing oneself under the spell of their long-forgotten but dormant feuds. The dragon is also precisely this, a materialization of the violence gold stands for. And just as the dragon is jealous of his gold, so is Grendel's mother determined to avenge her son, whose violence was aroused by the song of the scop in Heorot, the golden hall of the Dane. In the same way, the Grendels are the inherited feud of Cain and Abel, which is also a matter of offerings and sacrifice — "And in process of time it came to pass, that Cain brought of the fruit of the ground an offering unto the Lord. And Abel, he also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of the fat thereof. And the Lord had respect unto Abel and to his offering: But unto Cain and his offering he had no respect. And Cain was very wroth, and his countenance fell" (Genesis 4: 3-5).

Merely by doing the right thing for a Heroic warrior to do, Beowulf endorses a symbolic indebtedness of feuds and gold which are much above him, and have roamed the earth for ages before his birth, and will go on wreaking havoc for ages after his death. The thirteenth retainer cannot help his destiny, and he is repeatedly said to be acting "against his will" — "Not of his own accord did he who had sorely harmed him break into the worm's hoard, not by his own desire, but for hard constraint; the slave of some son of men fled hostile blows, lacking a shelter, and came there, a man guilty of wrong-doing". In a similar way, if Beowulf is a tragic hero, his tragic flaw is to be found in his character, for he is not a distinctive historical figure, but rather an epitome of

Heroic Man. Beowulf's *hamartia* lies precisely in the paradoxical nature of the law? Like Sweeney, of the Irish Saga, his elevation is his fall, and his exemplary fate is a tragedy in so far as it renders visible the impenetrable complexity of destiny. Beowulf does not fall because of hubristic selfishness, but because he was fated to die, *although* he was the best of men. "He is a man," said Tolkien, "and that for him and many is sufficient tragedy" (68).

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